



Introduction to Sri Vishnu Sahasranama



Vishnu Sahasranama is the rare, final teaching from the **Anushasana Parva** of the Mahabharata, delivered by Bhishmacharya to Dharmaraya (Yudhisthira).

Maharishi Vyasa gifted these thousand names to us in the form of a hymn (stotra). Each of the thousand names in the Vishnu Sahasranama is an **adjectival name** (describing a quality) of the Lord. While our names are merely identifiers to which we respond when called, every name of the Lord describes His divine attributes. We have many "Sahasranamas"—the Lalitha, Shiva, Ganesha, and Narasimha Sahasranamas are very famous. However, the Vishnu Sahasranama from the Mahabharata is the most renowned, as it contains the most extensive commentaries and has been interpreted by the greatest number of scholars.

There is another Vishnu Sahasranama found in the **Padma Purana**, but it is not as widely practiced. In the Vishnu Sahasranama, we see certain names repeated more than once. It is said that each name here has a hundred meanings; if a name appears twice, it should be understood to have two hundred meanings. However, discovering so many layers of meaning is impossible for common people. The "King of Sahasranamas" is the Vishnu Sahasranama of the Mahabharata's Anushasana Parva. As the ancients say, among spiritual texts, the "**Bharata**" (Maharishi Vyasa's creation) is the greatest because it is a divine composition.

निर्णयः सर्वशास्त्राणां भारतं परिचक्षते ।

भारतं सर्ववेदाश्च तुलामारोपिताः पुरा ॥

देवैर्ब्रह्मादिभिः सर्वैः ऋषिभिश्च समन्वितैः ।

व्यासस्यैवाज्ञया तत्र त्वत्यरिच्यत भारतम् ॥

Nirnayaha Sarvashastranam Bharatam Parichakshate ।

Bharatam Sarvavedashcha Tulamaropitah Pura ॥

Devairbrahmadibhih Sarvaih Rishibhishcha Samanvitaih ।

Vyasasyaivajnaya Tatra Tvatyarichyata Bharatam ॥

This means that the Mahabharata is the ultimate authority for the meaning of all scriptures. Long ago, by the command of Sri Vedavyasa, the Mahabharata and all the Vedas were placed on a weighing scale by Brahma, other gods, and all the sages. At that time, the **Mahabharata outweighed the Vedas** and all other scriptures!

The essence of such a Mahabharata consists of the **Bhagavad Gita** (700 verses) and the **Vishnu Sahasranama** (1,000 names). The Mahabharata is a text with a "weighty" (profound) meaning. Psychologically, it is a book that trains our minds. It explains the values of life that exist within every human being.

It is a scripture that illustrates the constant struggle between justice and injustice, Dharma and Adharma, and good and evil.

In the Mahabharata, the seven key characters of the Pandava camp represent eighteen qualities that a human being should possess:

1. **Dharmaraja** – Dharma (Righteousness)
2. **Bhimasena** – Bhakti (Devotion), Jnana (Knowledge), Vairagya (Detachment), Prajna (Wisdom), Medha (Intellect), Dhriti (Fortitude), Sthiti (Stability), Yoga, Prana (Life-force), and Bala (Strength).
3. **Arjuna** – Shravana (Listening), Manana (Contemplation), and Nididhyasana (Meditation).
4. & 5. **Nakula and Sahadeva** – Sheela (Character) and Vinaya (Humility).
5. **Draupadi** – Veda Vidya (Vedic Knowledge).
6. **Sri Krishna** – Vedavedya (The one to be known through the Vedas).

In this way, every verse, every word, and every letter of the Mahabharata speaks of the "Eighteenth One"—the Supreme Lord who stands above all.

The Mahabharata contains one lakh (100,000) verses, totalling 32 lakh letters. Every single letter is a name of the Lord. Thus, the Mahabharata is a collection of words singing the glory of the Almighty. Realizing that it might be difficult for common people to understand all one lakh verses, Vedavyasa placed two invaluable "essences" before us: the **Bhagavad Gita** and the **Vishnu Sahasranama**.

The Vedas have at least 3 meanings. While the verses of the Mahabharata have at least 10 meanings, every single name in

the **Vishnu Sahasranama** has at least a hundred meanings!! For this reason, the ancients considered the Bhagavad Gita and Vishnu Sahasranama as the most precious scriptures.

The **Brihati Sahasra**, which is the essence of the Vedas, contains one thousand mantras, and these thousand mantras comprise 72,000 letters. Vedavyasa graced us with the essence of these thousand mantras in the form of the thousand names (Sahasranama). A human lifespan is one hundred years. In these hundred years, there are 36,000 days and 36,000 nights. Similarly, the human body is made of 72,000 *nadis* (nerve channels)—36,000 on the left side and 36,000 on the right.

If blood circulation in these *nadis* functions correctly, a person will not fall ill. We generally chant the **Gayatri Mantra** a thousand times, thrice a day. Since the Gayatri has 24 letters, chanting it a thousand times equals 24,000 letters; doing this thrice a day totals **72,000 letters**. This corresponds exactly to the total number of *nadis* in our body.

By chanting the **Vishnu Sahasranama**, it is as if we have chanted the 72,000 letters of the *Brihati Sahasra*. This ensures full blood circulation through our 72,000 *nadis*. Therefore, the Vishnu Sahasranama is the cure for the "disease of worldly existence" (*Bhava-roga*). However, it is vital to chant it with an understanding of its meaning and a heart full of devotion.

The Significance of the Brihatee Sahasram

In the Vedic tradition, the "Chandas" or meter is determined by the number of letters in a Rik. The text highlights a hierarchy based on these counts:

- Gayatri Chandas: Consists of 24 letters.
- Ushnik Chandas: Consists of 28 letters.

- Brihatee Chandas: Consists of 36 letters.

While the Lord loves all Chandas, the **Brihatee Chandas** is His absolute favorite. Because it contains the highest count (36 letters) in this context, the Lord "loves it most," and the 1,000 names composed in this specific meter carry supreme spiritual weight.

Definition and Scriptural Foundation

The Brihatee Sahasram is the Vedic form of the 1,000 names of Lord Vishnu. While commonly known as a *Stotra* (hymn), in this context, the names are composed as Veda-Riks specifically in the Brihatee Chandas—a Vedic meter consisting of 36 letters. Its origin is rooted in the Aitareya Upanishad.

The Vital Role of Mukhya Prana...

A central tenet of this recital is that Mukhya Prana is the presiding deity for Brihatee Sahasra. According to the rules of the Vedas, whatever pleases Sri Hari (Lord Vishnu) must also please Mukhya Prana. As the mediator and presiding authority, Mukhya Prana accepts the spiritual fruit of this recital alongside the Lord.

Acharya Sri Madhwa's Commentary

The specific Sanskrit verse and its significance in Acharya Sri Madhwa's commentary on the Aitareya Upanishad (specifically section II-3-2-3) emphasize the unique relationship between the Lord, the Vayu (Mukhya Prana), and the Brihatee Sahasram. In his *Bhashya* (commentary) on the Aitareya Upanishad, Acharya Sri Madhwa provides the philosophical weight for this practice. He states:

तस्मात् बृहती-सहस्रं सर्वं मुख्यतः नारायणस्य अन्नं ।
तदाज्ञया वायोश्च । तस्मात् तत् शंसनेन, भगवान्, वायुश्च अति-प्रीयते इति ॥

Tasmāt br̥hatī-sahasraṁ sarvaṁ mukhyataḥ nārāyaṇasya annaṁ
|
tadājñayā vāyōśca | tasmāt tat śamsanēna, bhagavān, vāyuśca
ati-prīyatē iti ||

Meaning...

- **"Br̥hatī-sahasraṁ sarvaṁ mukhyataḥ nārāyaṇasya annaṁ":** Therefore, the entire Brihatee Sahasra is primarily the "Anna" (sustenance or food) of Lord Narayana.
- **"Tadājñayā vāyōśca":** By the Lord's command, it is also the sustenance of Vayu (Mukhya Prana).
- **"Tasmāt tat śamsanēna...":** For this reason, by the recitation (shansana) of these verses, both the Supreme Lord (Bhagavan) and Vayu are "ati-priyate"—exceedingly pleased.

Thus, the recitation of these 1,000 Riks is considered "Amruta Anna" (immortal food), making it one of the most pleasing offerings possible to the Divine.

Mukhya Prana is the presiding deity for Brihati Sahasra. He is the mediator through whom all worship reaches the Supreme Lord. Whatever pleases Sri Hari must, as a rule, please Mukhya Prana. Because Mukhya Prana is the deity governing this specific Veda-Rik form, he accepts the "Anna" of the recital alongside Narayana. The term "Anna" here is esoteric—it refers to the spiritual vibration and devotion that nourishes the divine relationship.

The Story of Viswamitra and Indra

The power of this recital is illustrated through a historical event involving Indra and the Great Rishi Viswamitra:

- After Indra slayed the demon Vritra-Asura (who was a devotee of Vishnu), he incurred the grave sin of Brahma Hatya Dosha.
- To cleanse himself of this blemish, Indra performed a grand sacrifice called the *Maha-Vrata*.
- Viswamitra served as the HOTA (the priest responsible for chanting). Using his immense spiritual power (*Tapo-Bala*), he spontaneously channeled the 1,000 Riks from the Rig-Veda into the Brihatee meter.
- The recital was so superb that Sri Hari possessed Indra (Aavesha), speaking through Indra's lips to express His delight. The Lord was so pleased that He commanded Viswamitra to repeat the 1,000 Riks three times.
- Upon realizing the third request came from the Supreme God Himself, Viswamitra offered the third recital as Anna-Naivedya (a food offering).

The Outcome...

Because the Lord and Mukhya Prana were so thoroughly pleased by this "Anna," Indra was completely freed from his sins and "supremely benefited," restoring his divine radiance (*Kaanti*).

Within the Madhva tradition, the **Vishnu Sahasranama** holds profound significance, a fact underscored by a famous episode from the life of **Sri Madhvacharya**.

This incident is recorded in the "Sumadhva Vijaya" the hagiography of Shri Madhvacharya composed by Sri Narayana Panditacharya. While explaining Vedic verses, the Acharya was challenged by scholars regarding the complexity of polysemy (multiple meanings). In response, Shri

Madhvacharya clarified that Vedic utterances possess three levels of meaning, the Mahabharata has ten, and remarkably, every name of Shri Hari in the Vishnu Sahasranama carries **one hundred distinct meanings**. When the assembly challenged him to prove this, the Acharya agreed on the condition that the scholars must be able to retain and repeat his explanations.

At the **Adoor Mahalingeshwara Temple** on the banks of the Payaswini River—where a memorial still stands today—the exposition began. Drawing upon rigorous grammatical rules, Vedic usages, and *Purva Mimamsa* principles, he rapidly delivered one hundred unique meanings for the first name, "**Vishva.**" The scholars, overwhelmed by his *purna-prajna* (complete wisdom), found themselves unable to repeat the vast depth of his discourse and bowed to his intellectual supremacy, acknowledging him as *Sarvajna*.

This legacy of scholarship has continued through various Madhva bhashyas (commentaries). The oldest is the *Niruktha* by Shri Vidyadhiraja Tirtha, a direct disciple of Jayatirtha (Teekacharya). Other notable works include a commentary by Raghavendra Yati (not Sri Guru Rayaru) and a popular Tamil translation by Kumbakonam Rama Rao.

Today, this rich tradition is preserved in a comprehensive volume published by the Dvaita Vedanta Studies and Research Foundation (DVSRF). Compiled by scholars like Prof. K.T. Pandurangi, this 546-page Sanskrit work, titled Vishnu Sahasranama Stotram (Vyakyana Chathushtyasamalangrutham), features four major commentaries:

- Shri Vidyadhiraja Tirtha's Shri Vishnu Sahasranama Niruktha

- Shri Raghunatha Tirtha's commentary (linking the Sahasranama with the *Bruhuthi Sahasra*)
- Shri Satyasantha Tirtha's Bhashya
- Shri Pangari Srinivasacharya's Commentary

Apart from the Madhva (Dvaita) tradition, several prominent spiritual figures from various philosophical schools have authored famous commentaries on the Sri Vishnu Sahasranama. Some of the prominent personalities include...

- Adi Sankaracharya
- Sri Parasara Bhattar
- Baladeva Vidyabhushana
- Swami Chinmayananda

The word **sahasra** in the title of the Sri Vishnu Sahasranama Stotram signifies "one thousand," representing the names of Sri Maha Vishnu woven into 107 poetic stanzas. Each name is *gaunani*—meaning it is not merely a label but a significant indicator of a specific quality (*guna*) or attribute of the Supreme Being (*Paramatma*).

While a thousand names are listed, they do not "limit" or fully define the Parama Purusha. According to the **Taittiriya Upanishad**, the Divine is infinite and transcends both words and the human mind (*yato vacho nivartante aprapya manasa saha*). Similarly, the **Isavasya Upanishad** teaches that the Divine nature exceeds the speed of human thought (*manaso javiyo*) and cannot be grasped through reason alone. Thus, the names chosen by Bhishma serve as a vital representation of the qualities most celebrated in the Vedas, Puranas, and epics.

Though the stotram was compiled by **Sri Vedavyasa**, various acharyas (revered teachers) have identified slightly different sets of 1,000 names based on their unique philosophical perspectives. A notable feature of the composition is the repetition of certain names.

Commentators emphasize that these repetitions are not a flaw (*dosha*). Instead, each recurrence is interpreted with a distinct meaning based on its specific context, supported by scriptural evidence.

Ultimately, these names serve as a bridge, allowing the devout to contemplate the "Indescribable" through the familiar attributes of Sriman Narayana.

परमात्मने सततमेकरूपिणे

दशरूपिणे शतसहस्ररूपिणे ।

अविकारिणे स्फुटमनन्तरूपिणे

सुखचित्समस्ततनवे नमो नमः ॥

paramātmāne satatamekarūpiṇe

daśarūpiṇe śatasahasrarūpiṇe |

avikāriṇe sphuṭamanantarūpiṇe

sukhacitsamastatanave namo namaḥ ||

[Sloka 41 of Sarga (Canto) 8 of the Sumadhva Vijaya]

Meaning...

"Salutations to the Supreme Soul (**Paramatmane**), who is eternally of one consistent essence (**satatam-eka-rupine**), yet manifests as the ten incarnations (**dasharupine**) and further expands into hundreds of thousands of forms (**shata-sahasra-rupine**).

To Him, who is beyond all change (**avikarine**), whose infinite forms are clearly manifest (**sphuta-mananta-rupine**), and whose entire being consists of nothing but pure Bliss and Consciousness (**sukhachit-samasta-tanave**) — I offer my repeated salutations."

Non-Quantifiable: The term *Sahasra* implies that just as one cannot count the grains of sand on a seashore or the rays of the sun, one cannot quantify the *Gun*as (qualities) of Bhagavan.

The Verse Connection: The verse confirms this by moving from "Ten" (*Dasha*) to "Hundreds of Thousands" (*Shata-Sahasra*), and finally to "Infinite" (*Ananta*), showing a progression toward the realization that He is truly immeasurable.

SuMadhva Vijaya and Vishnu Sahasranama both emphasize a fundamental truth: **"One thousand" is a figurative number, not a limit.** Divine attributes are infinite and beyond quantification.

While the *Sahasranama* lists one thousand names, this is purely symbolic. The number 1,000 (*sahasra*) represents **countless and immeasurable** qualities. The Divine is *Ananta* (Endless); therefore, His attributes cannot be restricted to any fixed number.

Bhagawan Vishnu is ANANTHA KALYANA GUNA PARIPOORNA the one who has countless number of auspicious/meritorious qualities/attributes which even Goddess Lakshmi Devi cannot count.

The names chosen by Bhishma are merely "better-known" indicators—a mere fraction of the infinite opulence of SriMan

Narayana, provided so that the human mind has a focal point for devotion.

Who can chant these precious names of the Lord, and when and how?

The Vishnu Sahasranama is a priceless gift given by Vedavyasa to humanity. It can be chanted by **everyone**, regardless of gender, caste, or creed, and at all times. It can be recited before or after a morning bath, in the evening, or at night.

It is essential to chant with clear pronunciation (distinguishing between *Alpapragna* and *Mahaprana*—unaspirated and aspirated consonants), with respect, faith, and a pure mind. In the Vishnu Sahasranama, there is forgiveness for errors in pronunciation made unknowingly. The Lord, who is the essence of all sound, forgives mistakes made unintentionally.

The Infinite Glory of Sri Vishnu Sahasranama

The Essence of Scriptures

Among the vast ocean of Vedic literature, the *Maha Kurma Purana* highlights a profound hierarchy. Ever wondered what the "essence" of all ancient scriptures is? The Maha Kurma Purana gives us a clear answer:

शास्त्रेषु भारतं सारं तत्र नाम सहस्रकम् ।
वैष्णवं कृष्णगीता च तज्ज्ञानान्मुच्यते जसा ॥

*"Shastreshu Bharatam saram, tatra nama sahasrakam;
Vaishnavam Krishna-Gita cha, taj-jnanan-muchyate jasa."*

Meaning: Among all scriptures, the Mahabharata is the essence. Within the Mahabharata, the Vishnu Sahasranama and the Bhagavad Gita are the creams or the crown jewels. Knowledge of these two assures liberation (deliverance) from the cycle of birth and death.

🔪 The Scene: A Battlefield Dialogue

The Great War of Mahabharata has ended. Prince Yudhishtira, though victorious, is mentally depleted, haunted by the suffering and death the war left in its wake. Seeking the "Supreme Path" and the "Supreme Dharma," he approaches the dying grandsire, Bhishma, who lies upon a bed of arrows. At the suggestion of Lord Krishna, Bhishma prepares to impart his final, most precious wisdom: the Sri Vishnu Sahasranama.

The entire discourse is built upon six fundamental questions asked by Yudhishtira in the *Anushasana Parva*:

❓ 6 Questions, 1 Answer...

किमेकं दैवतं लोके किं वाप्येकं परायणम् ।

स्तुवन्तः कं कमर्चन्तः प्राप्नुयुर्मानवाः शुभम् ॥

को धर्मः सर्वधर्माणां भवतः परमो मतः ।

किं जपन्मुच्यते जन्तुर्जन्मसंसारबन्धनात् ॥

కిమేకం దేవతం లోకే కిం వాప్యేకం పరాయణమ్ |

స్తువన్తః కం కమర్చన్తః ప్రాప్నుయుర్మానవాః శుభమ్ ||

కో ధర్మః సర్వధర్మాణాం భవతః పరమో మతః |

కిం జపన్ముచ్యతే జన్తుర్జన్మసంసారబన్ధనాత్ ||

కిమేకం దైవతం లోకే కిం వాప్యేకం పరాయణమ్ |

స్తువన్తః కం కమర్చన్తః ప్రాప్నుయుర్మానవాః శుభమ్ ||

కో ధర్మః సర్వధర్మాణాం భవతః పరమో మతః |

కిం జపన్ముచ్యతే జన్తుర్జన్మసంసారబన్ధనాత్ ||

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kimekaṃ daivataṃ loke kiṃ vāpyekaṃ parāyaṇam |
stuvantaḥ kaṃ kamarantaḥ prāpnuyurmānavāḥ śubham ||
ko dharmāḥ sarvadharmāṇāṃ bhavataḥ paramo mataḥ |
kiṃ japanmucyate janturjanmasaṃsārabandhanāt ||

Yudhishtira asks:

1. Who is the one supreme deity in the world? (*किमेकं दैवतं लोके*)
2. What is the one ultimate refuge or supreme goal for all? (*किं वाप्येकं परायणम्*)
3. By praising whom do humans attain auspiciousness and welfare? (*स्तुवन्तः कं प्राप्नुयुर्मानवाः शुभम्*)
4. By worshipping whom do humans attain that which is good and beneficial? (*कमर्चन्तः प्राप्नुयुर्मानवाः शुभम्*)
5. Which dharma (duty), among all dharmas, is the most supreme in your opinion? (*को धर्मः सर्वधर्माणां भवतः परमो मतः*)
6. By chanting (japa) whose name does a living being get released from the bonds of the cycle of birth and death? (*किं जपन्मुच्यते जन्तुर्जन्मसंसारबन्धनात्*)

The Single Answer from Bhishma...

Bhishma identifies **Bhagawan Vishnu** (the all-pervading Supreme Truth) as the singular answer to all six inquiries. He responds with the following core insights:

- The Supreme Being: The one God and ultimate refuge is the Eternal Father of all creatures, who is the most auspicious and pure.
- The Greatest Practice: Mankind attains true peace and prosperity by always praising and worshipping the "Lotus-Eyed One" (Pundarikaksha) with devotion.
- The Greatest Dharma: Among all paths, the most superior dharma is the constant adoration of the Supreme God through hymns and meditation.
- The Path to Liberation: One who daily chants the Thousand Names (*Sahasranama*) of the Lord is released from the bondage of *Samsara* (the cycle of rebirth) and all sorrows.

The Structure and Composition...

विष्णोर्नाम सहस्रस्य वेदव्यासो महामुनिः ।

छन्दोऽनुष्टुप् तथा देवो भगवान् देवकीसुतः ॥

**"Vishnor-nama sahasrasya Vedavyaso mahamunih;
Chando-nustup tatha devo Bhagavan Devaki-sutah."**

- Meaning: The Rishi (sage) of these thousand names of Vishnu is the great sage Sri Vedavyasa; the meter is Anushtup (eight syllables per quarter); and the presiding Deity is Lord Krishna, the son of Devaki Devi.
- Context: This is the standard liturgical introduction to the hymn. It credits Vyasa as the one who "strung the names together" after hearing them from Bhishma.

This hymn was strung together by Bhagawan Veda Vyasa, the author of the Puranas. It is composed of 142 shlokas organized into three blocks:

- The Introduction (13 shlokas): Where Yudhishtira asks six fundamental questions about the one God and the best Dharma.
- The Thousand Names (107 shlokas): The core of the Sahasranama, set in the *Anushtup* meter.
- The Phala Sruti (22 shlokas): The concluding verses detailing the fruits of recitation.

The Golden Rule of Remembrance:

Acharya Sri Madhwa reminds us that the goal of all rituals is simple:

स्मर्तव्यः सततं विष्णुर्विस्मर्तव्यो न जातुचित् ।
सर्वे विधिनिषेधाः स्युर्यतयोरेव किङ्कराः ॥

ಸ್ಮರ್ತವ್ಯಃ ಸತತಂ ವಿಷ್ಣುರ್ವಿಽಸ್ಮರ್ತವ್ಯೋ ನ ಜಾತುಚಿತ್ |

ಸರ್ವೇ ವಿಧಿನಿಷೇಧಾಃ ಸ್ಯುರ್ಯತಯೋರೇವ ಕಿಂಕರಾಃ ||

ಸ್ಮರ್ದವ್ಯಃ ಸತತಂ ವಿಷ್ಣುರ್ವಿಸ್ಮರ್ದವ್ಯೋ ನ ಜಾತುಚಿತ್ |

ಸರ್ವೇ ವಿಧಿನಿಷೇಧಾಃ ಸ್ಯುರ್ಯತಯೋರೇವ ಕಿಂಕರಾಃ ||

smartavyaḥ satataṁ viṣṇurvismartavyo na jātucit |
sarve vidhiniṣedhāḥ syuryatayoreva kiṅkarāḥ ||

Meaning: Lord Vishnu should always be remembered and never be forgotten. All the rules and prohibitions of the scriptures are merely servants to these two primary principles.

An ultimate dictum of Acharya Sri Madhwa. It emphasizes that the goal of all rituals (like the Sahasranama) is simply to maintain constant "Anusandhana" (focused connection) with the Divine.

Whether you seek mental clarity, protection, or spiritual growth, the Sri Vishnu Sahasranama is a gift for all of

humanity. It transcends caste, gender, and creed. Whether chanted at dawn or dusk, with full understanding or simple faith, it elevates the mind to the *Ananta Kalyana Guna*—the infinite auspicious qualities of the Supreme God Bhagawan Vishnu.



Sri KrishnaArpanamastu

नाहं कर्ता हरिः कर्ता
हरि सर्वोत्तम - वायु जीवोत्तम



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